

NOTES ON BIRD MIMICRY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
THE MOCKINGBIRD (*MIMUS POLYGLOTTOS*)

BY FRANK F. GANDER

I have studied the songs of Mockingbirds throughout a large part of their range and everywhere have found them to be exuberant songsters, bubbling over with the joy of life. But what variety of song and what wide range in ability for mimicry I have found! Some individuals have been so limited in their repertoire as to almost weary one with their endless repetition; others have caused me to marvel at the excellence of their imitations of varied sounds, but the song which I remember above all others is the impassioned outburst which kept myself and a number of others enthralled for many minutes one spring morning in 1918, down in Bibb County, Georgia. This mocker was a master artist and I was so thrilled by his wonderful melody that I forgot to listen for imitated calls and if such there were, they were so blended and woven into the beautiful harmony as not to be noted by me.

I first heard the song of a Mockingbird in my early boyhood days in Kansas. They were then just invading that region and were not common, so that I was greatly enthused each time I heard one. Later, in Escambia County, Florida, I found them abundant and enjoyed their singing almost daily throughout the spring and summer months. There is something very romantic about the night song of these southern mockers. They seem to weave it from the witchery of the moonlight, the fragrance of magnolia blossoms, the whispering of the little breeze in the palms and pour it forth in a silvery flood of vibrant notes. Their song seems to be the magic voice of the night itself.

My most interesting experiences with Mockingbirds did not occur where they are abundant. The first of these was in July, 1922, near the head of Matagorda Bay on the Texas coast. I had been motoring with relatives and in mid-afternoon we stopped near an old deserted farmhouse where we expected to camp for the night. As we were making camp, the song of a Mockingbird came faintly to our ears from the direction of another farmhouse which we could see out on the prairie. My first reaction to any bird call is to attempt an imitation in answer, so I promptly called to this distant mocker, putting more effort into the force of my whistling than into its quality. After one or two attempts on my part I listened in vain for an answer and I was rather chagrined, especially as smiles spread over the faces of my fellow campers.

After a few minutes I was suddenly surprised to hear an outburst of Mockingbird music from the roof of the house at which we had stopped. Without doubt this bird had flown in answer to my call, across the quarter mile or so of prairie which had separated us. I whistled my best imitations and call for call he followed me. As we sat down under some trees in front of the house, the mocker flew into the top of the tallest tree and, as we called back and forth, he gradually descended from limb to limb. As he came nearer his voice grew softer and softer and I, too, softened my whistling until, when he finally came to a perch directly over our heads and not five feet from the ground, we were just whispering.

The effect was broken by conversation and the bird returned to the housetop and later, as dusk drew on, winged his way back to his own rancho.

In the summer of 1923 I was staying on a farm north of Wichita, Kansas, and a Mockingbird which lived in that neighborhood was the master mimie of all I have heard. As the Arkansas River ran nearby and great trees lined its course, birds were abundant and I believe this mocker mimicked them all, although I have no actual list of the species which I heard him imitate. What seemed to me his most outstanding accomplishment was his imitation of a mechanical sound. Red-headed Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) were abundant and the house in which I stayed had a tin-covered projection on the roof upon which they would drum a long roll of taps and then yell with delight. The Mockingbird would sit on a nearby telephone pole and mimic the sound of their performance so perfectly that it was only by watching the birds that one could tell the imitation from the original.

One day as I waited for an interurban electric car the mocker was singing nearby and I whistled to him. He answered and we called back and forth and then he, too, like the Texas bird, came nearer and nearer and his calls became softer and softer. Finally he sat on a low perch nearby and looked squarely at me as he followed note for note every bird call which I could whistle. Then I began to improvise calls of a few notes and he followed, in fact, surpassed me as he added little thrills and tremolos which I could not hope to imitate. The arrival of the car for which I waited frightened him away.

Most Mockingbirds around farms can imitate excellently the peeping of little chicks and I have known of a mother hen becoming quite

distracted in searching for a lost chick while a mocker was peeping from a low perch in a fig tree. Eastern birds mimic the loud call of the Bob-white (*Colinus virginianus*) and our California birds give as clearly the three-note call of the Valley Quail (*Lophortyx californicus vallicola*).

The Mockingbird is not the only feathered mimic who can give an excellent rendition of this last call. On April 30, 1927, in a canyon in East San Diego, California, I listened to a California Thrasher (*Toxostoma redivivum*) who started his song by repeating twice this Valley Quail call. After singing a few stanzas this bird would pause and seemingly with much effort, give one clear, bell-like note. A line of cast iron pipes had recently been laid past this place and I wondered if the thrasher had derived his unusual note from that source as it reminded me of nothing more than of the clinking of two pieces together. I have never heard this note given by any other thrasher and never again by this bird.

On the same date and near the same place another thrasher was singing and during a lull in his song a Black-headed Grosbeak (*Zamelodia melanocephala*) sang its sweet song. No sooner had the grosbeak finished than the thrasher repeated the song note for note.

In May, 1927, a Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) was observed in Balboa Park, San Diego, and on the nineteenth of that month I was in the taxidermist's room of the Natural History Museum and heard what I thought was this bird calling just outside the window. I looked out but the only bird I could see was a San Diego Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia cooperi*) perched in a nearby tree. As I watched, he whistled a very good imitation of the call of the Cardinal. At no other time have I been able to find a resemblance between the call of the Cardinal and the song of the Song Sparrow.

From these experiences I am forced to believe that not only Mockingbirds, but other species as well, do consciously mimic the calls of other birds and even at times mechanical sounds.

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